



# Short Safety Subject

## **E. COLI: FOOD SAFETY PRECAUTIONS**

In the last few years a bacteria named E. coli has become a household name. What is E. coli? What dangers does it present, and what are the precautions one should take to prevent being infected? Given recent, serious outbreaks of illness, these are important questions.

Escherichia coli, more commonly called E. coli for obvious reasons, comes in many strains. E. coli normally lives in the intestines of humans and other warm-blooded animals without causing disease or illness. However, the strain called E. coli 0157:H7 is different. This strain, first linked to human illness in 1982, produces a dangerous toxin which is very harmful to humans.

Anyone can contract E. coli, but elderly people and those under five years of age appear more likely to develop serious infections. Infection can cause a complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). This is a disease in which red blood cells are destroyed and the kidneys fail. The majority of people contracting HUS recover completely, however it can be fatal.

The most common source of E. coli infection is red meat, especially ground beef which is rare or undercooked. However, E. coli 0157:H7 has been found in other food items such as mayonnaise, unpasteurized milk, some unpasteurized juices, and contaminated water. Person-to-person transmission of this bacteria is also on the rise. This manner of transmission is typically from an infected child or adult who does not wash their hands thoroughly after using the restroom.

**What are the Symptoms.** Symptoms of an E. coli infection appear about 3 days after exposure, although it can range between 1 to 9 days. The symptoms of E. coli can be bloody or non-bloody diarrhea or abdominal cramps. Some amount of blood is usually found in the stool as well. This infection usually causes little or no fever. Most infected people will recover without medication in 5 to 10 days. Fluid and electrolyte replacement is important when diarrhea is present or there are signs of dehydration. The use of antibiotics in fighting the disease are unproven to date. Anti-diarrheal medication should be avoided.

There are several simple and straight forward ways to prevent being infected by E. coli 0157:H7:

- Do not eat undercooked ground beef. Cook it to at least 160<sup>0</sup> F or until all pink is gone from the interior and from any juices. Other meats have not yet been linked to E. coli outbreaks.
- Drink only pasteurized milk and milk products.
- Wash hands with hot, soapy water after using the restroom and before preparing food.
- Wash hands, utensils and surfaces with hot, soapy water after contact with raw meats and /or meat juice.
- Wash all fruits before eating. Low-acid, unpasteurized fruit juice is also considered a risk.
- When eating out, check hamburgers and ground beef for doneness. Return any food to the kitchen which is not thoroughly cooked.